'An everyday story of country folk’ online? The marginalisation of the internet and social media in *The Archers*

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‘An everyday story of country folk’ online

Abstract

In this chapter, we explore to what extent storylines about the internet and social media are absent or marginal in *The Archers*. In particular, we examine these storylines to better understand how the inhabitants of Ambridge interact online and how their online activities intersect with their real-world experiences. We compare what happens in *The Archers* with the moral panic that often characterises narratives of technology use and find a striking contrast that we argue supports a broader way of understanding and characterising practices of online safety and security. We analysed four social media related Archers’ storylines from the last 24 months. Our analysis shows that *The Archers* storylines enable us to look at human computer interaction in relief so that instead of only looking at how people use technology we can also see the context in which it is used and the usually unseen support structures. *The Archers* narratives also provide a rich picture of how the fixed-space of the physical world interacts with virtual space. In the broader context, the social media storylines provide us with an understanding of how connecting, care receiving and care giving take place in both fixed-space and virtual space and how these co-connected relationships of care-receiving and giving contribute to a form of security more expansive than technologically-enabled data protection.

Keywords

Digital technology, social media, security, safety, community
Introduction
In this chapter, we explore to what extent storylines about the internet and social media are absent or marginal in *The Archers*. In particular, we examine these storylines to better understand how the inhabitants of Ambridge interact online and how their online activities intersect with their real-world experiences. We compare what happens in *The Archers* with the moral panic that often characterises narratives of technology use and find a striking contrast that we argue supports a broader way of understanding and characterising practices of online safety and security in everyday life.

We start by looking at *The Archers* from the real-world perspective of rural internet connectivity and the social media response to its storylines. After exploring two different ways of understanding everyday security we focus on three themes that illustrate the contribution that we believe *The Archers* makes to our understanding of online safety and security which we summarise as follows: Firstly, *The Archers* storylines enable us to look at human computer interaction in relief so that instead of only looking at how people use technology we can also see the context in which it is used and the usually unseen support structures. Next, *The Archers* narratives provide a rich picture of how the fixed-space of the physical world interacts with virtual space. Finally, social media storylines provide us with an understanding of how connecting, care receiving and care giving take place in both fixed-space and virtual space and how these co-connected relationships of care-receiving and giving contribute to a form of security more expansive than technologically-enabled data protection.

We conclude by reflecting on how these themes contribute both to the drama’s storylines and to our understanding of online safety and security.

*The Archers*, the Internet and Social Media
*The Archers* has always had a social policy emphasis, initially focused on post-war agricultural community issues. It has covered major social topics over the decades, most recently with a storyline on domestic violence. One social topic that fits *The Archers* social policy focus is the issue of internet access and connection speeds in Ambridge. This is an everyday social as well as an everyday technology issue that affects many rural communities in the UK. While internet availability is similar in both rural and urban areas across the UK, rural internet connectivity has significantly lower connection speeds. A rural village will have an average of nine Mbit/s (UK Government, 2016) whereas the average urban speed is twenty-six Mbit/s. Access in rural communities may well be to use a dongle to access broadband via a mobile signal where it takes ‘4mins and 49 secs to download the Sheep Society web page’ (Farrington et al., 2015, p.46). The same study suggests that, ‘over 1 million people in Britain are potentially excluded from, or at best find it challenging to participate in, what is generally regarded as ‘normal’ online social, commercial, creative and civic life, because they live in deep rural areas’ (Farrington et al., 2015, p.3). The response to this problem has included real-world campaigns in rural communities to try and improve speeds and some groups are implementing DIY broadband (using their own tractors to dig trenches, negotiating their own deals between farmers to cross land for example (Kleinman, 2016).

The community activism dimension to the DIY broadband story cited in the previous paragraph, shows how technology can move to the centre of a rural storyline whilst retaining a social impact focus. It offers an engrossing everyday story of empowerment where communities are finding their own solutions to the pressing problem of internet connection speeds. It is, however, only in community narratives such as *The Archers*, that interwoven implications of such a technological intervention and the concomitant community and individual responses can be explored. We argue that our analysis of the digital media storylines found in *The Archers* indicates that a storyline of DIY broadband would be likely to include implications of faster broadband for digital use within the Ambridge communities, the emergent security and safety issues and the community responses to
these issues, including a variety of digitally-mediated forms of community care. In such a story a more expansive interpretation of security and safety is likely to be presented including not only technological know-how but also the wider links between digital usage and financial, health and housing securities for example.

Connecting Spaces and Communities: makings and sayings of an *Archers* universe
Social media is threaded through the fabric of the listening culture that surrounds *The Archers* as we can see through the response to the Helen Archer and Rob Titchener storyline, as well as the live tweets during broadcasts, dedicated twitter accounts both official (@bbcthearchers) and unofficial (@dumteedum), podcasts, plot summaries and in-depth discussions about the storyline in popular online forums, such as Mumsnet. This strong social media response from listeners indicates that social media and its usages are of interest to sections of *The Archers* listening audience. However, when social media appears in an *Archers* storyline, it is typically not centre stage but a side issue and always characterised as a mundane everyday activity. It is used as a narrative device to weave together fixed-space, where face-to-face interaction takes place and day to day physical activities such as farming are performed, with virtual spaces found in social media and on the wider internet.

Roy Tucker’s online dating storyline demonstrates how social media offers a way to connect with people you would not normally meet, but also helps to augment everyday relationships as Kirsty Miller and Jack ‘Jazzer’ McCreary provide support for Roy’s online dating. Taken at face value, the use of social media in *The Archers* primarily offers a means of connecting worlds. For example, social media is used in *The Archers* storylines as a way to bring the outside world, people away from Ambridge, into the narrative. It offers the characters the ability to communicate beyond their village community. Social media is also used to connect the world of *The Archers* with the worlds of *The Archers* listening community, by offering listeners a means of conversation with scriptwriters. As the editor of *The Archers* explained, it was discussion on social media that pushed the Helen and Rob storyline on as it became clear that listeners were ahead of the plot from the very beginning (Greenslade, 2016) and that the scriptwriters needed to keep up. However, social media offers *The Archers* a lot more than a technique to connect worlds both to and within a story line; social media presents both the listeners and the inhabitants of Ambridge with an opportunity to reflect on how the real world and the online world intersect and contribute to the narrative of collective care and support that is central to *The Archers* narrative. It is this notion of support that is of particular importance when understanding digital technology use in its broader context and where *The Archers* presents an opportunity to explore how an individual’s safety and security can be augmented by social media and how social media can constructively support daily life. It is this positioning of social media that offers an alternative to the moral panic framing that often accompanies social media use.

Two Tales of Everyday Security
We found it interesting to see that the scriptwriters have not as yet taken the opportunity to characterise social media use in the programme in terms of moral panic (Cohen, 2002). As the Ambridge flood storyline demonstrated this is a resilient community that establishes and maintains security of both the individual and the collective through relationships. Social media as a communicator, an augmenter of kin and friendship networks is a sympathetic narrative to the theme of community resilience. Given this characterisation, we argue that *The Archers* has a considerable contribution to make to a social policy that speaks to an everyday security that recognises the role social media can play in the development and management of relationships of trust grounded in everyday routines.

This characterisation differs strikingly with the more typical characterisation of social media as a cause for social concern. Moral panic or widespread social concern about the use of the internet and social media often reflect the assumptions of a particular community and tend to revolve around
safety and security issues and practices. Just as there have been no storylines about internet connectivity neither have there been storylines focusing on moral panics or cautionary tales related to security and the use of the internet. Examples of such narratives could have included identity theft, cybercrime, cyberbullying or cyber fraud. Such narratives, however, typically characterise the individual as isolated, vulnerable and without recourse to support from kin and friendship networks and, of course, this is at odds with the typical narrative arc of *The Archers*.

A moral panic or cautionary tale is, however, not the only way in which social media usage and use of the internet in general can be framed. Security theorist McSweeney (1999) argues for a broader framing of security, one that includes the freedom to live free from fear as well as protection from harms. It is this framing of security as freedom from fear that is the most dominant in *The Archers*. The notion of living free from fear is linked to the fundamental idea of ontological security, the sense of each being secure in the other (McSweeney 1999; Roe 2008). In order to live life free from fear, we need to have a strong sense of ontological security that is, as *The Archers* storylines show, largely created through our relationships founded on basic trust and the use of everyday routines. A sense of biographical identity is also important to ontological security where an individual has a clear picture of who they are and where they have come from and, again, is a key tenet of *The Archers* universe. An individual’s ontological security keeps feelings of chaos at bay and social media can both contribute to an individual’s ontological security as well as disrupt it. The Archers storylines have largely presented a picture of positive social media use that supports an individual’s everyday life. The social media use is typically presented in storylines as being grounded in a strong sense of biographical identity and supported by a kin and friendship network that is able to absorb any unsettling effects of social media use. Our analysis of *The Archers* storylines has led us to conclude that this is achieved by a focus on the social networks that support human computer interaction, narratives that link fixed and virtual spaces and storylines that, at times, link the giving and receiving of care with the use digital and social media.

**Human Computer Interaction in Relief**

Instead of the usual focus on how an end user engages with technology *The Archers* gives us the opportunity to look at this scenario in relief as the web of relationships between the technology users and the non-user or supporting user is foregrounded. This foregrounding of the web of relationships into which technology usage is woven, is perhaps the strongest contribution that *The Archers* makes to the social media debate. Kirsty becomes Roy’s ‘dating advisor’ helping him to, ‘get back out there’. While Kirsty’s support is not obvious to anyone interacting with Roy online she is playing a key role in determining how he projects himself and refuses to allow him to give up when he is demoralized at his lack of success saying, ‘you can’t give up now… it’s early days yet’. In the virtual world, Roy works out how well his job stacks up against other online daters and Kirsty challenges the veracity of the statistics that he cites pointing out that he can’t believe the self that is projected by others. She points out that he must move from connecting to messaging and then meeting to develop a full sense of the person he has shown an interest in. Roy is supported by an extensive community of supporting users in Jazzer, Tom, Kirsty and Phoebe Aldridge who all advise and encourage. Kate Madikane reports to Alice Carter that as Roy has become more confident he is, ‘swiping away, left, right and centre’. Linda Snell, however, expresses a similar point of view to Jolene Archer suggesting that he is just as likely to find someone in community activities than he is by putting his, ‘faith in a dating app’.

This brings us to an examination of where competence lies in social media use in Ambridge and how competencies circulate and are shared (Watson & Shove, 2008). Competencies include skills, know-how and techniques (Shove et al., 2012). Social policy regards digital inclusion or exclusion as a binary discussion of access to technology and individual skills to use technology. *The Archers* however demonstrates that this is only partly what makes an effective technology user. In *The
Archers, digital competences circulate between those who know how to use social media and have experiences to share and those who are new to it but these competences are shared within the context of community knowledge about the real-world context in which such competences will be used. This support is an interesting aspect because it demonstrates how experiences in virtual space and fixed space interact, are mediated by communities and linked in a way that is often ignored when we think about online skills.

As we can see in the online dating storyline, Kirsty has the knowledge of how to use online dating applications. She tells Roy that he will need, ‘a decent profile first’ and her comment on his photograph, ‘No-one’s ever going to swipe right on that’ suggests that she has experience of using Tinder, as does her comment that looking online at night is a, ‘good time for the drunk and lonely’. Kirsty’s character is implicitly tapping into the experience of the listeners in the assumption that they will know what she is making reference to. Kirsty demonstrates a ‘cosmopolitan knowledge’ (Shove et al., 2012, p.50) and an experience of online dating apps that is then localized as she tempers it with her understanding of Roy’s everyday life.

Fixed Space and Virtual Space
Just as the real-world of social media influences the fictional world of The Archers so the storyline of Roy’s online dating experiences is a good example of how fixed-space interacts with virtual space to create and shape Roy’s identity in both spaces. Kirsty takes control of Roy’s online presence and understands the importance of managing his profile and his photograph online. Roy struggles with the idea that his projected self will be at odds with his real self, he asks, ‘isn’t it cheating?’ and says, ‘it all seems so false’. Kirsty has a no-nonsense response to his concerns with, ‘yeah, well welcome to 21st century dating’. The fact that it takes three episodes to take and choose a photo demonstrates how much care Kirsty is putting into Roy’s projected image (right the way through to hiring Holly the dog as an accessory) and underlines that the world of social media is not merely digital but also virtual, a space into which alternative identity narratives can be projected (Miller 1995, Robinson 2007). Such performances happen in a different space to the fixed space interactions in everyday life but is an accepted fiction by both the person who projects and the person who views.

In a very practical way space is important in the transmission of social media practices. As Shove et al. (2012) point out, social geography limits and constrains practices. While the internet is global we may choose to limit our online connections because of fixed-space constraints. We see Kirsty showing Roy how a location-based dating app limits who he will interact with. It is this very feature, of course, that causes him, much to his disgust, to be matched with Tracy Horrobin. In a similar way, Roy’s online dating experience is mediated through past fixed-space experiences of others. Jazzer insists that Roy should take his advice with online dating and who to choose because he is, ‘in the know’ and has been doing online dating for a while. Not only that but even though Roy is reticent to engage in online dating he is encouraged by a panoply of other characters in fixed-space, including his daughter Phoebe. While Roy is embarrassed to admit that he has been looking at dating sites and says it got a, ‘bit addictive’, virtual space gives him a freedom that was lacking in his fixed-space affair with Elizabeth Pargetter. Kirsty sets his reluctance and embarrassment at online dating in context with her lack of patience and her exclamation - ‘it’s not internet porn!’.

It is Roy’s sense of safety and security in his fixed-space that also helps him to absorb his mistake in texting the wrong message to the wrong woman. Roy’s sense of safety and security in the fixed-space relationships that surround him, give him the confidence to take his online dating missteps in his stride. In this particular narrative, The Archers storyline uses to great effect the multi-layering of the virtual and fixed spaces. The listener is encouraged to stay one step ahead here so that we hear Roy talking to Jolene in The Bull but in the background we can also hear a number of text alerts. Roy is distracted – being in two worlds at the same time. Eventually Jolene asks, ‘what’s with all these
texts Roy?’. It is at this point that we see a different side of Roy. His sense of safety and security in his relationship with Jolene and in the collective relationship he has with the Ambridge community (of which The Bull is symbolic) means Roy feels empowered to admit that he’s engaged in online dating with, ‘not just one woman’ and reveals that he has a spreadsheet to manage his dates. Jolene and Rex Fairbrother help him recover from his mistake by discussing it in fixed space and help him to put it into perspective with alternatives as Jolene suggests, ‘instead of using these fancy apps .. do it the old fashioned way’. It is possible to believe that if this had happened to him while he was online on his own late at night (the time for the, ‘drunk and lonely’ as Kirsty pointed out) his reaction would have been very different from his response in the pub to his friends, ‘Do you know what? I’m not even going to look’.

Connecting, Care Receiving & Care Giving
Framed in the context of The Archers, the story of social media safety is less one of data protection and more one of care giving and care receiving – of being and remaining to be secure within each other. As Berenice Fisher & Joan Tronto (1990) have suggested that “caring can be viewed as a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible’. From this perspective, we can argue that sharing and supporting through social media is one means of giving and receiving care. Care giving and care receiving also connects to the concept of being secure within each other because it offers forms of protection found in relationships as Roy’s online dating storyline shows us.

Ambridge reflects some of the attributes found in British rural communities, for many in Ambridge social media will be woven into the fabric of everyday lives and they do not worry about it unduly. The majority of the Ambridge communities is portrayed as feeling safe and secure within their relationships with each other in both fixed and virtual space and this engenders a resilience that enables them to weather mishaps and adverse events that occur in both fixed and virtual space.

One storyline that strongly illustrates these points is the Helen and Rob storyline. It is interesting that during her pregnancy, Helen made no reference to Mumsnet. Clearly, Helen fits the Mumsnet demographic and indeed Mumsnet was certainly very vocal about Helen and her experiences. One possible interpretation for this absence is that Helen was not on Mumsnet quite simply because she didn’t need to be - she has strong family connections close by and close friends to help her. Another interpretation is that Helen is on Mumsnet but it isn’t newsworthy in everyday conversation.

Although the virtual type of caregiving is likely to be present in Helen’s life, it is the fixed-space caregiving that was to the fore in the Helen and Rob storyline. For example, when Helen goes on her, ‘pamper day’ we can see the positive benefits of caring and connecting that help to make Helen more secure and safe in her surroundings. Kirsty is trying to care for Helen but is blocked by lack of presence and contact. Similarly, at the family dinner we see the family coming together and reminiscing about a missing care giver in John Archer (Helen’s brother) while at the same time we see Tom Archer caring for Helen when she runs out crying. He knows something is wrong saying, ‘I’m here if you ever need to talk’.

The narrative of security grounded in trusted relationships, community solidarity and everyday routines fractures however, when faced with isolation and silencing. Rob isolates and silences Helen cutting her off from family and friends and in this way increases her feelings of insecurity but disrupting her everyday routines and rupturing her biographical identity and therefore, her sense of self. He does this through a strategy of marginalization that cuts her off from her Archers identity and gaslighting Helen to the point of disrupting her everyday routines making it easy for Rob to engulf Helen in a sense of chaos and dread. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Rob’s campaign to persuade Helen to stop driving which disrupts her identity as an independent, capable woman.
and inhibits her ability to maintain relationships with friends and family. At the family dinner, we see the effect of Rob’s gaslighting in more detail. Helen has already started to doubt her own state of mind so that when Pat Archer asks her if Ursula Titchener passed on Kirsty’s ‘phone message and whether she wrote it down, she says her, ‘brain’s turned to mush’. Only a short time later when Rob arrives with the scan photograph she berates herself for forgetting it. Throughout this episode with the family dinner we hear others reporting on Helen’s state of mind but hear little from Helen. Rob talks for her and puts words into her mouth but we rarely hear her voice directly. This silence can be interpreted as a sign that Helen’s life is tipping into chaos and in so doing, her insecurities are engulfing her in dread.

Lily Pargetter’s party is a good example of a more multi-layered story that brings together care-giving and receiving in both fixed space and virtual space. As with all *Archer* characters, Lily is part of a network of care-givers and care-receivers, she gives Phoebe advice and makes sure that she makes the right choices about who to talk to. In turn Ian Craig worries about Lily’s safety and whether he has, ‘made an awful mistake’ in trying to be, ‘the cool uncle’. He worries about the party being advertised on Facebook, comparing Lily’s party with his childhood escapades when social media did not exist. His fear is that it could end up as a, ‘free for all at Lower Loxley’, echoing the moral panic scenario that we might normally expect to see. In reality though, he knows Lily has a, ‘good head on her shoulders’ and, as we see, her network of friends looks after her making sure the party is not disclosed. She thinks it’s, ‘so sweet’ that Ian and Adam Macy come over to look after her that she invites them into the party so, ‘you can check we haven’t destroyed the place’. So, while Ian is worried about the perils of Facebook and Instagram, Lily’s kin and friendship circle have ensured that social media is managed so that Lily’s party is not threatened by gatecrashers and remains a friends and family affair. This is a very different narrative to the one that is often in the press about the dangers and imminent threat of social media-fueled aggressions.

Interestingly in *The Archers*, security breaks down when people move to the periphery of the community, just as it does for individuals when they isolate themselves on-line. However, *The Archers* storylines reveal the complexity of isolation and silencing and *The Archers* highlights that we need to understand the nature of particular forms of isolation and silencing in order to effectively respond to it. For example, whilst Freddie Pargetter is silent in the fixed-spaces within *The Archers*, we can imagine that he is more socially connected on-line. The subplot to Lily’s party is his re-entry into the fixed-space community. Furthermore, it is only when Freddie re-enters the fixed space that he can see his contribution to the people around him and only then do opportunities appear for Elizabeth to explore why Freddie distanced himself in the first place. The fixed-space is therefore the space of healing through the provision of care. The virtual space is a means of escapism (in Freddie’s case escaping the identities of being the son of a dead man and living in a posh house), denial and identity performance.

**In Conclusion**

Our exploration of the marginalisation of the internet and social media in *The Archers* compares interestingly with what happens in the real-world. There is no mention of the importance of connectivity or the problems of rural broadband but we do know that in the real-world rural communities are coming together to solve these problems themselves. The empowerment, however, that is indicative in these types of activities is evident in *The Archers*. This is a resilient rural community where they look after each other. The use of the internet and social media is largely a background activity and there is no cause for moral panic because the inhabitants of Ambridge have a strong sense of community and their place within it. Members of the community support both Roy and Lily in different ways bringing to bear their skills where needed and sharing knowledge and expertise. We see how identities are created and shaped through the interaction of fixed-space and virtual space and how even in an online environment there can be geographical and experiential
constraints that shape behaviours. Through the Rob and Helen storyline we can see how social media could offer support where there is real-world isolation and silencing but the flip side of this is, as we see with Freddie, that the online world can also become a place to hide.

As our reflection has shown, it is a particular type of marginalisation of technology and social media that occurs in *The Archers*. The marginalisation is of the narrative of social media usage giving rise to a type of moral panic. *The Archers* brings into sharp relief, the shared and social conventions around technology use embedded within a tightly woven web of community relationships and offers an alternative story of technology as support to networks of solidarity and resilience that naturally occur within the Ambridge communities.

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Josh review:

Well, I hadn’t really thought about social media this way before. For me it’s always been a tool, something I use to get the job done. It’s really useful being able to work from anywhere - I mean I’ve even worked from the bus shelter before now! Of course, I know all about privacy settings and passwords - don’t always use them mind you, but yeah – people of my age know what we are meant to do. I hadn’t thought about any of the relationship stuff though; I’m just focused on getting my business off the ground. Sometimes the pressure of starting a new business can mean that we’re a bit distracted with what we put online. We’ve already lost some commission because of Rex’s mistake and I can see how one of us could put the wrong price on some machinery we’re advertising online. I mean we’re under pressure all the time. If that did happen, Debi and Lizzie are right, it would be down to how well we got on with the client as to whether it caused a problem, as well as how quickly we picked it up and reacted. Not sure about this idea of caring though — I’ll have to give it some more thought. Being a successful businessman is more my thing than being a caring businessman!!!

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Peer review needed, nominated Josh